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ADDIS ABABA AS MODERNIST RUIN*

by Elleni Centime Zeleke

Keeping in mind that Addis Ababa translates to mean “new flower,” I want to appropriate some of the sights and sounds of this relatively new city in order to rub it against the landscape of transformation, “erasure and reinscription” (modernism), that has characterized Addis Ababa since its founding in the late 1800s (Holston 5). I am particularly interested in Addis Ababa’s transition from the Socialist oriented military junta known as the Derg (1974–1991) to a city governed by a post-communist, free market regime. Under the Derg, Scientific Socialism was adopted as the country’s method of governance. On the basis of this new method, the military junta introduced across the country—but particularly in Addis Ababa—a public culture of signs and symbols that represented various aspects of the new regime. Monuments to Lenin were erected, as were numerous billboards of Marx, Lenin, and Engels. In 1991, along with all the other countries behind the iron curtain, the military junta fell. The public billboard culture, however, did not disappear; rather the billboards were replaced by ones produced by private companies.

I understand Addis Ababa’s latest transformation as being more of the same, whereby the city’s public space is organized under both regimes with the same aesthetic-politico sensibility—a sensibility that is grounded in a certain ease with both erasure and reinscription. I also view the very public nature of the billboards under both regimes and the way they have come to dominate the Addis Ababa landscape as serving as a useful heuristic device to get at both the tactics served up to, as well as deployed by, Addis Ababa’s residents so as to cope with everyday life.

* In 2002, I visited the studio of Kebede Bogale who was then working at the state run photo lab at the exhibition center near Meskel Square. When I visited his studio, I explained my research and he showed me a number of very interesting images of Addis Ababa that he had taken in the 1980s. He also gave me a few hard copies of prints that he had developed himself, as well as permission to use the prints in the context of my academic work. I would like to extend my gratitude to Kebede Bogale for permission to reprint his images in this essay.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the officials at the Ministry of Information and the Ethiopian Tourism Commission who, in 2002, granted me oral permission to reproduce many of the images printed with this essay. The permission was sought while conducting research on the history of Addis Ababa for my MA thesis. The permission granted also included dissemination of my research in a non-commercial, academic context.



Figure 1. Mural of the chairman of the Derg with the broad masses, Addis Ababa (1984) by Berit Salstrom.



Figure 2. Highland Queen Whiskey Advertisement (2001) by Elleni Zeleke.

The City

Although the usual date used to mark the founding of Addis Ababa is 1886,¹ in fact it was not until after the Ethiopian victory over the invading Italian army in 1896, at the battle of Adwa, that Addis Ababa really became the permanent capital of the new consolidated Ethiopia. It was also at this point that it became clear that Addis Ababa would become a sort of modernist monument for the rest of Ethiopia and the world in general—proving that this once “backward empire” had at last entered the world stage. Railways and roads were quickly built, as was the first grand hotel, Tayitu Hotel.

Yet what is remarkable one hundred years later is that people continue to walk. Yes, here people walk, and they continue to bring their mules, their donkeys, their cows, and their sheep into town. And they walk. On their pack animals, they bring the wheat, the teff, and the rye that will feed the residents of this city. Often an animal is put up for sale because the farmer is in trouble and needs a little extra cash. This is mostly the case with oxen, for oxen are used to plow the land. But the sheep? Other than wool, why is a lamb good for keeping? They are only good because they can be sold as meat. There are many sheep markets around town. You can buy a sheep, take it home, hire a boy to help you skin it, and eat it fresh that same day. This is common. The sheep are tasty.

Perhaps you are wondering how farmers and the slaughter of animals fit in with a capital city. But the tides of people that come in and out of this place are a part of the city, and they are many. Early each morning one sees farmers and herders entering the streets of Addis Ababa and for the rest of the day, depending on your luck and your attitude, you may be blocked for some time waiting for the animals to cross the street.

The official census puts the Addis Ababa population at three million people, but the temporary residents must swell the population far beyond that number. And where do they sleep, after they have sold their wheat, their animals, and, for some no doubt, all their worldly possessions?

Today, it was dusk when I left the university and starting walking south towards the main part of town, and as I walked I noticed that people were collecting themselves, their belongings, their cardboard, their *gabbis* (cotton blankets); they were making beds for themselves on the wide sidewalk that follows along the boulevard leading out from

campus life. Striking too was the light coming over the surrounding mountains—it had a certain quality: blue. Hints of blue covered everything. Later, returning up this same street, everything was quiet. Walking, I carefully navigated sleeping bodies.

It is unusual to find such a wide pavement and therefore so many bodies lying in a row in this city. But this is an unusual street. The official name of this street is King George IV Avenue. But there have been other names. For instance, during the Italian Occupation it was called Via Principessa di Piemonte (Zewde 53). And before that it must have been something else, but in this city it is hard to track down the history of street names. The residents, oblivious to the official names of streets, continue to call them after what suits their sensibilities. And the officials, oblivious to the residents, hardly ever post the name of the street on the street itself. But as a result in this city you cannot use a map and expect the locals to know where you are going.

The current demotic name for this street is Sidist Kilo (“Six Kilos”). And as far as I can tell even if the official names have changed this is what the users of this street have always called it. It is not that this street is six kilometers long. Rather, it is that this boulevard starts where six minor streets from six different parts of town converge at a roundabout.

The Sidist Kilo roundabout conveys everything one imagines about grand boulevards. No matter which direction one enters it, starting from 200 meters away, one sees the *Yekatit 12 Monument* (*February 19th Monument*) standing out. This monument, which was erected sometime in the mid 1950s, commemorates those who died in a rebellion against Fascist Italy and consists of a

slender four sided marble shaft, tapering toward a point and surrounded by white marble steps . . . Somewhat above the center of the shaft, borne on a marble shelf across one corner, is a bronze effigy in the round of the traditional Lion of Judah, the emblem of Ethiopia . . . At appropriate distances between the lion are two bands of bronze sculpture in high relief. . . . These sculptures depict the agony of the Ethiopian people during the war and the Italian occupation. (S. Pankhurst, “Addis Ababa Today” 45–53)²

The grandeur and suggestiveness of Sidist Kilo does not stop there. Just north of the roundabout, which gives the area its demotic name, is one of Haile Selassie’s old palaces: what is known as the Geunet Leul (“Princely Paradise”) Palace. In the late 1960s this palace was given to the people of Ethiopia by Haile Selassie to be used as the main campus of the first secular university in Ethiopia: what was then called The Haile Selassie I University and which is now called The University of Addis Ababa. The Geunet Leul Palace is not old. It was built in 1935, just in time to impress a Swedish Prince visiting Ethiopia.³ Apparently, Haile Selassie, ever mindful of impressing Europeans with how advanced his country was, did not find his former palace, located just down the boulevard on what is presently called Development Through Cooperation Avenue, suitable for a European prince.

The older palace that was rejected on the occasion of the visit of the Swedish Prince was built at the turn of the twentieth century and reflects Ethiopia’s confusion as to how exactly it should project its new found modernity. Aware that being modern means one must be international, this palace is an odd mix of Ethiopian, Middle-eastern, Indian, and European architecture (Habte-Mariam). The Guenet Leul Palace on the other hand,

resembles any nineteenth century European bourgeois, grand mansion. Today, it houses the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and the National Ethnographic Museum. In addition, the palace compound itself houses most of the undergraduate Social Science faculties. These buildings, which not long ago housed the former workers of the ruling monarch, became the hotbed of much of the radical socialist activity that eventually toppled Haile Selassie's regime during the 1974 revolution.

If I walk south along King George IV Avenue (Sidist Kilo), grandeur amidst destitution continues to be the nature of the landscape. I therefore see a conglomeration of institutions that claim to govern daily life in this city and the country for which this city is the capital. I find: the main residence for the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; the National Museum (which houses the bones of Lucy, the first hominoid); the National Theological School; St Mary's Cathedral (one of the larger churches of the city); the School of Graduate Studies; the Ministry for Economic Development; the Zoological Museum; and the Ministry of Education (Examination Section), itself housed in a tall, gray, triangular modernist skyscraper. All of this I see in no more than fifteen minutes.

Development through Cooperation

Reaching lower ground, Sidist Kilo joins Arat Kilo (Four Kilos), another avenue which begins with a roundabout at the point where four streets converge. Arat Kilo is also home to a tall, slender, imposing monument: this one commemorating the liberation of Ethiopia from Italian occupation in 1941. The monument consists of a fifteen meter long slender stellae meant to recall the ancient stellae at Axum in northern Ethiopia (S. Pankhurst, "Addis Ababa Today"). Towards the bottom of the monument is a wide, supporting base that depicts through text and sculptural means the history of the Ethiopian liberation. When the monument was first built, the sculptural relief told the story of Haile Selassie's entry into Addis Ababa and the country's subsequent liberation. However, the imagery was later changed by the Socialist regime to depict an ordinary partisan (Haile-Mariam 17).



**Figure 3. Arat Kilo (1984)
by Kebede Bogale.**

Just below Arat Kilo is Development Through Cooperation Avenue; and located just below the junction where this avenue meets Arat Kilo is Parliament House. Built in 1930 by Haile Selassie, this measure of democracy was granted to the people, not because they demanded it, but as a result of Haile Selassie's wish to make Ethiopia a modern state-nation.⁴ Ethiopia's parliament building is small but with its lighted clock tower conjures up Westminster, "the mother of all parliaments" (S. Pankhurst, "Changing Face" 155).

Following Haile Selassie's lead, but in a far more radical modernist fashion, the Derg also made the area from Arat Kilo along Development Through Cooperation Avenue, the center of much of its government activity. Thus, by the time the tenth anniversary of the revolution rolled around in 1984, it had built a Socialist Realist style Congress Hall of the Workers People of Ethiopia right next to the Parliament building (Djote 5). In addition, the Derg built a few other modernist buildings where important political work was carried out. Today, these buildings continue to be used by the present regime to carry out the business of governance. Development Through Cooperation Avenue is therefore a high security zone. Here, there are no sleeping bodies. At night, all that is demotic disappears in favor of pure space.

The Sidist Kilo/ Arat Kilo stretch down through Development Through Cooperation Avenue is well known for the political demonstrations that erupt from time to time in Addis Ababa. Each regime has had to contend with its opponents, often with violence in this high security zone. Thus, with each regime the area is often decorated with flags and other suitable images of patrimony. During the Derg, the Arat Kilo area in particular was decorated with rainbows, Socialist Realist style portraits of the party leader, portraits of Marx, Lenin, and Engels, as well as political slogans. Today, the only object lit throughout the night other than the State buildings is the huge billboard adjacent to the Yekatit 12 monument, owned by the Mono 2000 advertising company and currently leased to Coca-Cola. For twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, one is confronted with well-dressed, modernized Ethiopians being doused with refreshing brown liquid. However, given that a bottle of Coca-Cola costs over one Ethiopian Birr (around eleven American cents), and given that the average annual per capita income of the country is 1,600 Birr (around \$140), this billboard suggests that which is attainable and yet ungraspable much in the same way as the Socialist billboards once did—attainable because these billboards demonstrate worldly power that can be yours (after all you are of the world), but which in fact only truly belongs to the small group of people whose income bumps up the national average to its present levels: under objective conditions both Coca-Cola and socialist power appear to be luxury goods.

But to come back to Arat Kilo for just a moment, I want to tell you that today Arat Kilo's northerly wall in the roundabout area is commonly used to post jobs, unsold newspapers, courses at private boutique type colleges, and other community issues. Late in the afternoons, crowds gather to read, and I begin to understand why a government may be scared of these groupings. There are so many of them, reading together.



Figure 4. Addis Ababa (1984).
Photo courtesy of Ethiopian
Tourism Commission.



Figure 5. Addis Ababa (2002)
by Elleni Zeleke.

Walking and Interpreting

All of this is overwrought. Recently, a fellow pedestrian explained to me that the images produced by Mono 2000 and other billboard companies demonstrated the variety of goods produced in Ethiopia and so made him feel proud of his country. Indeed, Mono 2000 and Socialist Realism were not so far apart in this young man's mind; both promoted images of patrimony, of all which was good in Ethiopia. If the young man had a quarrel, it was that the present regime did not put up enough posters and billboards to make the residents of Addis Ababa feel good about their city and their country. The young man was nostalgic for the socialist regime, a time, he claims, when Ethiopia was free from ethnic problems and the streets of Addis Ababa were clean.⁵

Born just before the time of the socialist revolution, this young man went to school and was raised under the Derg regime. What he remembers is that in Addis Ababa, when he was growing up, everyone was guaranteed a job, a house, and a minimum income. Everyone was proud, they had purpose, and the country was united. Now, he asks: what do we have? who can we look up to?

One might suppose that the answer would lie with those who are older and grayer. I stopped an old man and asked what he thought of the changes to the Addis Ababa land-

scape. He replied that he did not recall the changes as he had spent most of the seventeen years of the Derg regime in a prison cell with reactionaries and other opponents of Scientific Socialism. Indeed, he thought my question frivolous. But a secret bond tied the young man to the old man. Ambivalence tempered their interpretations.

Monuments and Modernity

In the early stages of this tour of Addis Ababa, it must have already become obvious that the Italian Occupation left a dramatic mark on the development of the city. The father of modern architecture, Le Corbusier, in fact, created the first official Master Plan of Addis Ababa for Fascist Italy.⁶ Later, much of his plan was adapted and implemented by the Italian architects and urban planners, I. Giudi and C. Valle.⁷ Since the fascist period, with every regime a new Master Plan and sometimes two or three Master Plans are created and implemented, though never to completion. But the Italian impact is more than this. Certainly, the fact that nearly every monument on Addis Ababa's wide avenues commemorates some aspect of the various wars with the Italians testifies to their enduring presence.

Thus, when I travel west after reaching Arat Kilo, and after I pass the Berhane-Selam Printing Press ("Light and Peace" Printing Press) and the Ras Mekonnen bridge, I end up in the area sometimes known as Piazza, other times Arada, or more officially simply called the City Hall Area. Here, I find the recently restored monument of Minilik II: founder of Addis Ababa, leader of the Battle of Adwa, and founder of modern Ethiopia. This monument was originally erected in 1930, on the same day that Haile Selassie was crowned the third Emperor of Modern Ethiopia. Unlike any other in Ethiopia, Haile Selassie's coronation was specifically prepared for visiting guests from around the world, and in particular from Europe. The unveiling of the monument was thus an integral part of the showing up of Ethiopia against Europe.

During the occupation of Fascist Italy in Addis Ababa (1936–1941), the Minilik monument was taken down and buried in an unmarked grave. It was later found and restored. During the fall of the Derg regime (1991), a group of Oromo people,⁸ opposed to the territorial integrity of modern Ethiopia, apparently attempted to pull the monument down once more.⁹ What is surprising, however, is that unlike the previously mentioned roundabouts, no one has dared hang commercial or political billboards in close proximity to this monument.

The Minilik monument was the first of its kind to be erected in Ethiopia. Made of copper in Germany in Rococo style, the monument portrays Minilik as an equestrian. According to a recent article written for a magazine published by the Ministry of Information and Culture, the message the monument conveys to the onlooker is "Italians, I am catching up with you" (Haile-Mariam 17). Yet, if this is the message of this monument, perhaps it can be said that this is the message meant to be conveyed by the city of Addis Ababa in general: "Ethiopians, we are catching up with them."

In the background of the Minilik monument stands St. George's Cathedral, one of the city's oldest churches. In the foreground sits the imposing City Hall, designed by the Eritrean-based, Italian architecture firm Studio Mezzedimi sometime in the 1960s.

Perched on a hill which overlooks the city below, it is composed of a tall, slender tower flanked by symmetrical wings on either side (Habte-Mariam 207–08). Climbing to the top of the City Hall tower, one sees all of Addis Ababa. Looking from any point below, one is confronted with the slender tower of City Hall. During the time of the Derg, this tower was often decorated with a variety of images that would urge the people toward building a Socialist nation.

The circular area enclosed by City Hall and St. George’s Cathedral and centered around the Minilik Monument has, in the past ten years or so, become a favorite place for Addis Ababa’s displaced residents to make a home for themselves. Unlike the sleeping bodies one navigates in Sidist Kilo, the homes here have a more permanent feel to them, even if the materials used in their construction are less than sturdy. And yet, between the sleeping bodies of Sidist Kilo and the temporary housing that surrounds the Minilik monument, it is hard to know which area is more disquieting. One thing for sure is that the modernist gestures that surround these displaced people seem that much more modern, monumental, and ostentatious than they would anywhere else.

The Arada/Piazza/City Hall area has other stories. *Arada* is the Oromo word for market, and Arada was a place of trade and commerce even before Minilik and his court settled in Addis Ababa, displacing and assimilating the earlier inhabitants (Misttir 9–13). During the Minilik period Arada continued to be a commercial zone, though this time with a more cosmopolitan flavor (R. Pankhurst). However, during the Italian Occupation all Ethiopians, be they Oromo, Amhara, Tigrean, etc., were removed from the area which became a White-only section of town. The Italians did allow the locals to reopen a market for themselves in the southwestern part of the city and so moved the growth of Addis Ababa in that direction (Zewde 50).

There are a number of ways to get to the southern section of town from the Piazza area. One could follow the numerous small and broken roads that lead away from Arada, or one could follow what is often referred to in the literature on Addis Ababa as the monumental axis. This north-south axis is also called Churchill Road. It stretches out from City Hall and ends on much flatter ground, at the Railway Station that once departed daily for the Red Sea, and that was built in 1929, by the Frenchman, Paul Barrias.¹⁰

Monuments, Modernity, and the Derg

Just before arriving at the Addis Ababa railway station, at the bottom of Churchill Road, lies Our Struggle Monument. Erected for the tenth anniversary of the Derg-led revolution and resting on a total area of 30,000 square meters, the monument has three parts. There is a tall front column which, along with a star at the top, is fifty meters high. At thirty meters is a replica of The Socialist Ethiopia Hero’s Medal, 2.7 meters in diameter and weighing in at 700 kilograms. In front of the column is “a 20 ton relief, depicting all those who fought for the defence and unity of the country” (Ethiopian News Agency). At either side of the relief is a tableaux. The left tableaux depicts the misery and suffering of the Ethiopian people before the Revolution, while the right tableaux shows Mengistu Haile-Mariam, the leader of the Derg, with a cross-section of the Ethiopian people laying down the foundations of Socialism (Ethiopian News Agency). Stretching out from the tableaux is a wide

water fountain. During the heyday of the monument's use, this fountain area came to be known by a variety of names including "The People's Lavatory." This made sense; water was flowing, and as we know from rivers, water washes waste away. Where the waste ends up, has never, until recent times, had to be a question. Addis Ababa's mostly rural-raised population thus took it upon themselves to similarly put Our Struggle's water fountain to use. A health hazard like no other, Our Struggle Monument was eventually fenced off from the public. Today the water fountain is never turned on.

The inaugural celebrations for Our Struggle Monument were attended by Comrade Konstantin Cherenko, General Secretary of the Central Party of the Soviet Union, Arap Moi, Prime-Minister of Kenya, as well as representatives from East Germany and other Eastern Bloc nations. As mentioned before, the inauguration was part of a general celebration for the tenth anniversary of the revolution; however, this anniversary also marked the transition from a Provisional Military Government to a genuine Workers Party of Ethiopia, even though all of the old officials continued to occupy positions created by the new party. The dignitaries inaugurating Our Struggle therefore had a busy schedule. They also had to inaugurate a Lenin monument on Minilik II Boulevard, and a Karl Marx monument across from the Guenet Leul Palace at Sidist Kilo (Ethiopian News Agency).

According to Kifle Djote, "The 10th anniversary of the Revolution transformed Addis Ababa" (5). All commercial signs were removed from the streets, and slums were blocked off from view by miles of painted tin (Henze 306). In addition, public squares and monuments were erected, construction of new buildings was finalized, colorful electric lights depicting the tri-colors of the Ethiopian flag were put up all over the city, new portraits of Marx, Lenin, and Engels were erected at nearly every important juncture in the city, and "Churchill road itself was lined with statues and beautifully illuminated" (Djote 5). Apparently, "the decoration and installations . . . [had] been designed not to serve temporary objectives but to remain as they are permanently, so as to serve all future purposes" (Djote 5). Most striking about the tenth anniversary, however, were the men and women, "deployed in all directions, in smashing brand new uniforms, and strolling the city in couples and triples, to maintain order and discipline" (Djote 5). With the creation of a Workers Party, militiamen in uniform were no longer required to patrol the streets; the powers that be could now rely on ordinary citizens, dressed in blue—the uniform of the proletariat.

And where are the permanent monuments, portraits, and lighting fixtures that the Derg erected? Erased? Disappeared? I recently found the 1984 statue of Lenin lying on its back in a garage run by the Addis Ababa Municipality. Surrounded by weeds and empty red and yellow Shell oil drums, the workers in the garage warned me that I should not wake Lenin. And indeed, his sleep did not seem tranquil. He could have been easily disturbed. I bent over him; the oil drums spoke back. One can imagine what they said.

There is a rumor in Addis Ababa that the Lenin monument was constructed from the copper of the coins disposed of when the Derg took over from Haile Selassie's regime and changed the nation's currency to a more worker friendly decor. Could this rumor be true? As far as I know, the Lenin monument was a gift from the Soviet Union. Why would Ethiopia ship its old coins to the Soviet Union, only to have them returned in the form of a Lenin monument? The rumor does make a good story though, and indicates new lines and new metaphors for thinking about the fall of the various regimes in modern Ethiopian; the supposedly old and outdated is shipped out and then re-imported as a value added, foreign made object.



Figure 6. Our Struggle monument (1984) by Kebede Bogale.

Erasure and Reinscription

The Lenin monument was brought down in the early days of the fall of the Derg regime. A number of people gathered to witness the monument's demise. But the intrigue was not with what might seem to be the obvious political message of the monument's fall, but with the technical know-how required to bring down such a large and heavy work. Unfamiliar with the erasure of monumental and seemingly permanent structures, people were fascinated with modern capabilities for bringing down the permanent.

Our Struggle Monument has a different story. Today this monument remains in place, uncared for but still standing. Perhaps the lesson learned from the Lenin monument is that it would be too expensive to move Our Struggle. Now if the Derg monuments are to fall it must be by their own accord. However, always located at key areas of town, the Derg monuments were for many years after the regime's demise perceptible rubble next to commercial signs, billboards, and posters with entirely new and contrasting messages.

It is uncanny. In a somewhat eerie twist, where once these monuments would be situated next to a poster, a portrait, or a slogan depicting some aspect of socialist life, the hammer and sickle now comfortably rots next to a sign for Pepsi. However, for the passerby this twist must also throw the entire history of modern Ethiopia into relief. Ambivalence must be key to reading all of this.

One of the more interesting contrasts that the current situation in Addis Ababa provoked was a wall hanging of Haile Gebre-Selassie, just east of Our Struggle Monument at the crossroad known as Ambassador. The wall hanging was a larger than life vinyl

reproduction of Haile Gebre-Selassie, famous for being the world's fastest middle distance runner. At the top of the reproduction was the saying: "*yechallal*" 'We can do it!' Sponsored by the United States Assistance for International Development, this expensive contribution to the landscape of Addis Ababa simultaneously reminds one of the Nike slogan, "Just do it," and the Derg's nation building efforts. Again, the contrast between old and new no longer seems so sharp. Addis Ababa's governing regimes all address the residents with little concern for how they organize their daily life, or even a consideration of the structural reality in which that life must be organized. And yet their address is so pervasive. Just do it.

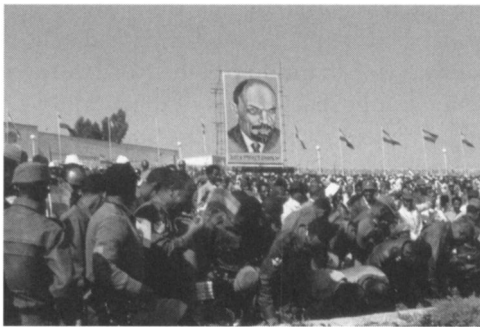


Figure 7. Lenin Poster (1984). Photo courtesy of Ministry of Information.



Figure 8. "We can do it" poster of Haile Gebre-Selassie (2002) by Elleni Zeleke.

Revolution after Revolution

Before Churchill Road ends it meets the east-west axis at what is presently called Ras Mekonnen Avenue, but was earlier known as Field-Marshal Smuts Road (S. Pankhurst "Changing Face" 138). When I turn east I end up at what is sometimes called Revolutionary Square and other times called Meskel (Cross) Square. When I turn west I pass Mexico Square and eventually end up in the old airport area, one of the more fashionable residential neighborhoods in Addis Ababa. On my way to this posh part of town, I pass the headquarters for the African Union, and arriving at the crossroad that leads towards the genteel Addis Ababans I come across numerous signs for Embassies, International NGO's, Consulate Generals, beer, whisky, and airline companies.

Meskel Square's history is less charmed. Before 1958, Meskel Square was known as Ras Berru Meda (Ras Berru Field), as the area was given to Ras Berru by Minilik at the turn of the century (Bekele). His mansion, later expropriated by the Socialist government, continues to sit on a hill that overlooks the square. The mansion is presently home to the Addis Ababa Museum.

In 1959, Haile Selassie's regime decided to hold a Meskel celebration in this wide-open space. Meskel is one of the bigger festivals in Ethiopia. It follows approximately two weeks after New Years (September according to the Ethiopian calendar), and celebrates the finding of the true cross. In 1974, after the fall of Haile Selassie's regime Meskel Square

was renamed Revolutionary Square. It was the site of all of the May Day rallies, Revolution Day celebrations, and the occasional political shooting.¹¹ It was also the site where, in 1977, the Derg officially declared a Red Terror on the forces of reaction. It is also where they called for “everything to the war front,” collecting a militia of 300,000 volunteer soldiers to march on Revolutionary Square and show their opposition to Said Barre and his imperialist supporters.

Before the fall of Haile Selassie’s regime, Meskel Square was a dirt field. It was not until the time of the Derg that the field was redesigned and asphalted, with stadium like seats erected. In addition, arches to mark one’s entry and exit into the square were put up. A permanent exhibition center was also built next to Ras Birru’s mansion. During the tenth anniversary of the revolution much attention was again paid to Revolutionary Square. A gigantic billboard of the Derg leader was erected, and better executed portraits and scenes of socialist life were put up. Additionally, more arches were placed on the roads that lead south out of Meskel Square. These arches were designed with the help of the North Korean State and were painted in gay colors, often depicting some aspect of how life had improved since the revolution. The arches usually contained a typical socialist slogan, such as “Long Live Proletarian Solidarity” or “Workers of the World Unite.”¹²

Today Revolution Square is often called Meskel Square. What name you use depends on where your sympathies and your historical conditioning lie. However, at the meeting point of six major avenues Meskel Square certainly lies in the purview of advertising companies. Learning well from their previous leaders, the new leaders of the free market economy have replaced the Derg’s billboards with ones designed to sell products, not ideologies. What astounds the keen observer, however, is that these new billboards are placed in exactly the same positions as the old billboards, towering over the passerby in the same monumental fashion.



Figure 9. “Long Live Proletarian Internationalism,” Bole Road at Meskel Square (1984) by Kebede Bogale.

It is a strange fact that although a number of arches designed by the North Koreans went up around town, the arches at Meskel Square have had staying power. Well into the twenty-first century these arches remained in place surrounded by large ads from Coke, Pepsi, and a number of beer companies. Thus for many years after the fall of the Derg regime, the arches of the socialist era remained as a ruin from a long lost era while the gaily-painted scenes of factories and agricultural abundance appeared as fudgy spots of color on rusting iron. Indeed, for many years no one seemed to know what to do with these arches. Should they come down? Should they be restored? If they are restored, should they tell a different story? Eventually, with little fanfare or sorrow, someone somewhere made the decision in 2003 to officially pull the arches down.

The entrance and exits to Addis Ababa have always been markers of the State's desires and its collusion with various social forces. Presently, two of the busiest roads that lead out of Addis Ababa are Bole Road—it leads out from Meskel Square onto the International Airport—and Debre Zeit (Bishoftu) Road. This latter road leads from Meskel Square to the Southern Regions of the country. During the Derg period, these two roads (but Bole Road in particular) were heavily decorated. On Bole Road, one would find more general images of socialist life, while on the roads leading to the regions one could find billboards with slogans such as "Everything to the War Front." Today, one cannot count the number of commercial billboards that adorn these streets, there are that many. The *Globe and Mail* has claimed that this erasure and reinscription is indicative of Ethiopia's promising future (England A12).¹³ As I walk the streets of Addis Ababa I can only read a darker, although to be sure, more subtle narrative in all of this—one form of modernity is dumped, only to re-enter as a value added import.

Indeed, just forty minutes south of Addis Ababa on Debre Zeit Road one used to find the Derg-built Heroes Village: a model socialist community, particularly aimed at rehabilitating soldiers. One of the more remarkable features of the community was its museum. Here many billboard-like artistic productions created for the Derg regime were hung or stored. In addition, many of the country's leading artists were commissioned (without pay) to create works for the museum's walls. After the fall of the Derg, the soldiers were sent home (perhaps to the pavements of Sidist Kilo?) and without warning some of the walls were torn down while others were painted over. Today, at the site where the Heroes Village once stood, a military engineering college now operates.

Also extending out from Meskel Square is Minilik II Boulevard, this time in a north-east direction. Created in 1955, this street was once known as Jubilee Highway. A gift of the Ethiopian people to Haile Selassie, Jubilee Highway was created in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Haile Selassie's ascension to the throne. Divided in two by gardens that contain pleasant pink and yellow flowered plants, this highway became home to Haile Selassie's Jubilee Palace, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Africa Hall, another gift from Haile Selassie to encourage The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa to base their headquarters in Addis Ababa. Indeed, Jubilee Road was built at a time when a number of African countries had recently won their independence from Europe. Forever looking outward, Haile Selassie understood the importance that Ethiopia played in the imagination of Pan-Africanists as the only African country to have resisted colonization. Jubilee Highway was therefore built in anticipation of making Addis Ababa the diplomatic center of a new Africa (S. Pankhurst, "Changing Face" 138; Ahderom). The Derg, unaware

of how closely their modernizing tendencies resembled Haile Selassie's utopian efforts (if not his successes), later placed their tenth anniversary Lenin monument in the foliage directly across the gated entrance to the Economic Commission for Africa.

The Stuff of Dreams

Addis Ababa is a tirelessly monumental city. Just before I reach the end of Jubilee Highway I pass the paragon of cold war architecture, the 1960s Addis Ababa Hilton Hotel, and then land right back at Minilik II's Palace. Here, I also come to the tail-end of Development Through Cooperation Avenue. Addis Ababa: a city of palaces and modernist utopian gestures. But are these gestures really the stuff of dreams? After all, every contemporary city has a Hilton Hotel, lit billboards, and a collection of ill-fitting Mercedes Benz.

In 1959, the then Mayor of Addis Ababa, Dejazmatch Zawdie Gebre Sellassie, delivered an address at the Ethiopian National Library entitled "Problems and Plans of Addis Ababa." In the address, he assured his august audience that a "municipality could not destroy a whole town as being a slum" (38).¹⁴ In a somewhat similar vein, in 1986, at the conference convened for the centenary celebration of the founding of Addis Ababa, Dejene Habte-Mariam delivered a paper on "Architecture in Addis Ababa." In this paper, Habte-Mariam claims that "Addis Ababa has very few buildings that do not possess sculpturally treated facades" (210). But, I wondered reading Habte-Mariam's most informative article, none of the structures located on the narrow side streets that extend on either side of Sidist Kilo contain sculptural facades. These simple structures, usually made out of mud, are where a large percentage of the residents of Addis Ababa live. And we can be sure the architects of these buildings rarely think of sculptural facades except as something belonging to *Tillek Sew* ("the big man"). If these structures of the poor do not figure into Habte-Mariam's account of Addis Ababa, perhaps it is because the places lying in the in-between spaces of the city do not really count as buildings. Habte-Mariam cleverly solved Dejazmatch Zawdie Gebre Sellassie's dilemma of whether or not to destroy the city that is a slum; just ignore the slum.

In a review of the basic principles of the Derg regime's Master Plan of Addis Ababa, Techeste Ahderom tells us that the regime's new Master Plan will convey a strong symbolic image: "the image of a modern socialist country which also has deep roots in the past. The image of a city, the features of which are strongly determined by the natural environment and vegetation. The image of a city, which taking advantage of present social and economic patterns of growth, wants to become better balanced, more equitable, and more pleasant to live in" (23). Yet, before telling us all of this, we are reminded that "investments and expenditures that would be unjustified vis-a-vis the income level of its population and present difficult conditions of the economy of the country become necessary when the ambivalence of [Addis Ababa's] functions are taken into consideration" (Ahderom 23). Addis Ababa is both an international diplomatic center and a local city. Given this ambivalent status it must forge ahead in becoming more modern; its status after all is not so ambivalent. And the locals who live alongside this diplomacy, what do they do? They must see their making do, their tactics erased in the wake of all this image-making. They

too start again. Not from scratch, but from the materials left behind by *Tillek Sew*.

The present Addis Ababa administration, large and impenetrable as it may be, has managed to put their current Master Plan into action. As a result a series of new highways and ring roads connecting the outskirts of the city to each other are under construction. A stretch of the highway running off from the posh old-airport neighborhood has recently been completed. Driving on this highway that runs through less affluent neighbourhoods, one truly feels elsewhere. The road is so smooth. The majority of users of the highway, I am sure, must also feel this way.

The new ring roads are fenced off on either side. Other than the designated exits one cannot enter or leave the strips of smoothness. Thus the neighbor who once ran to the *souk* ("local shop") across the street to purchase a little sugar now is supposed to walk for quite some way to reach an exit or an overpass in order to access this same neighbor. But the residents living along the highway will have none of this. Throughout the day one therefore sees old and young, women and men, jumping over the fence. And then, of course, there are all the animals being herded from the countryside into the city. The shepherd, understanding that he has the same right to the road as the Mercedes Benz, makes no haste. It is impossible for a car to speed on this highway.

All this can produce a truly fraught commentary, but for some it is merely an irritation. As a result there have been rumblings amongst the driving class of Addis Ababa, who, pleased with the beauty of the new highway, now wish to train the rest of the Addis Ababa residents on how to use a modern highway.

In the weekly English language newspapers *Fortune* and *The Reporter*, there has been a recent spate of articles decrying the condition of Ethiopia's capital city. We are told that once Addis Ababa's streets were clean and much less crowded, whereas now all one can smell is garbage; the streets of Addis Ababa are overcrowded; the migration from the rural areas is uncontrolled; the numbers of the homeless are swelling. Unlike Habte-Mariam's maneuverings, the various noxious smells cannot be ignored.

One response to this was a project initiated by Gashe Aberra Mola and sponsored by a number of international NGO's. Aberra Mola is a well-known classical Ethiopian musician who lived in exile during the Derg regime. Returning to Addis Ababa, he was shocked and dismayed by the city's poverty. He remembered the shiny new highways built by Haile Selassie, the skyscrapers built in the 1960s, the aroma of espresso as one drove into Piazza. Aberra Mola wanted to make a change. He wanted the old pride of Addis Ababa to shine once more. Using his celebrity status, Aberra Mola thus encouraged street children to create paintings of various aspects of Ethiopian life, past and present. The paintings were then placed at strategic points around Addis Ababa. He also encouraged the street kids to create gardens in central squares in Addis Ababa and to fence these gardens so as to create a feeling of orderliness in the city. The project took the city by storm, managing to inspire a number of otherwise lethargic residents to take up the call to clean up the city. It is this project in fact that popularized the phrase, "We can do it!" An uncanny twist to all of this is the smarts of Mono 2000. Next to some of the more prominent areas decorated by Aberra Mola's crew, a number of gigantic billboards were put up. The whole thing, I must confess, did give one a feeling of civic pride. But, I also remember many people being filled with awe when they stared at the billboards of Marx, Lenin, and Engels. This city, they used to say, is no regular Third-World Capital. It is so Modern.

Ambivalence, then, tempers all interpretation.



Figure 10. A town square north of Addis Ababa (1997) by Elleni Zeleke.

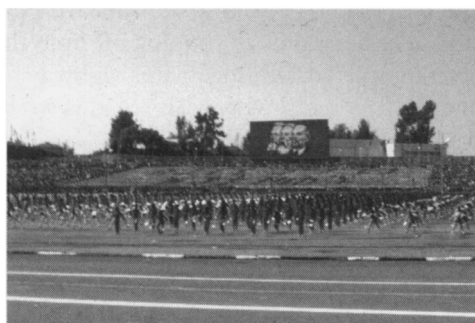


Figure 11. Meskel Square with children performing on the 10th anniversary of the revolution (1984). Photo courtesy of Ethiopian Tourism Commission.

In any case, most of the people I talked with barely noticed the billboards erected by Mono 2000. Unlike the billboards erected by the Derg, little humor or commentary is generated by this new act of reinscription. On the other hand, two years after Aberra Mula's storm took over Addis Ababa, other than maintaining the main squares, the volunteer labor initially involved in the project lost interest; the fences are coming down and the paintings are being erased. Apparently "Just doing it" is proving to be a little more complicated than initially thought.

Spread over 218 square kilometers, the places located behind and in-between the modernist gestures of Addis Ababa are becoming more prominent than all the modernist gestures put together. Thus, between the act of erasure and the act of reinscription the users of the city leave behind the trivial and banal: "produc[ing] in a place that does not belong to [them]" (De Certeau 87). The people transform the Derg's waterfountain into a lavatory; the utopian intention of the modern is blasted out of history.

Living Amongst the Billboards

Remembering the billboards and monuments of the Derg regime immediately puts into tension two differing temporalities. One temporality is the former newness of the Derg, its olden modernity, its former possibility. The second temporality is the newly new or the newly modern of the present regime. The tension of the two temporalities immediately creates a dialectical image whereby the fore-history of the Derg billboards and monuments—the narrative of a nation on a path to modernity—is confronted by a new narrative of onwards and upwards, a new utopian moment. Here, the after-history of the Derg billboards is indeed the story of decay. The triumphant national *ethos* of the Derg is

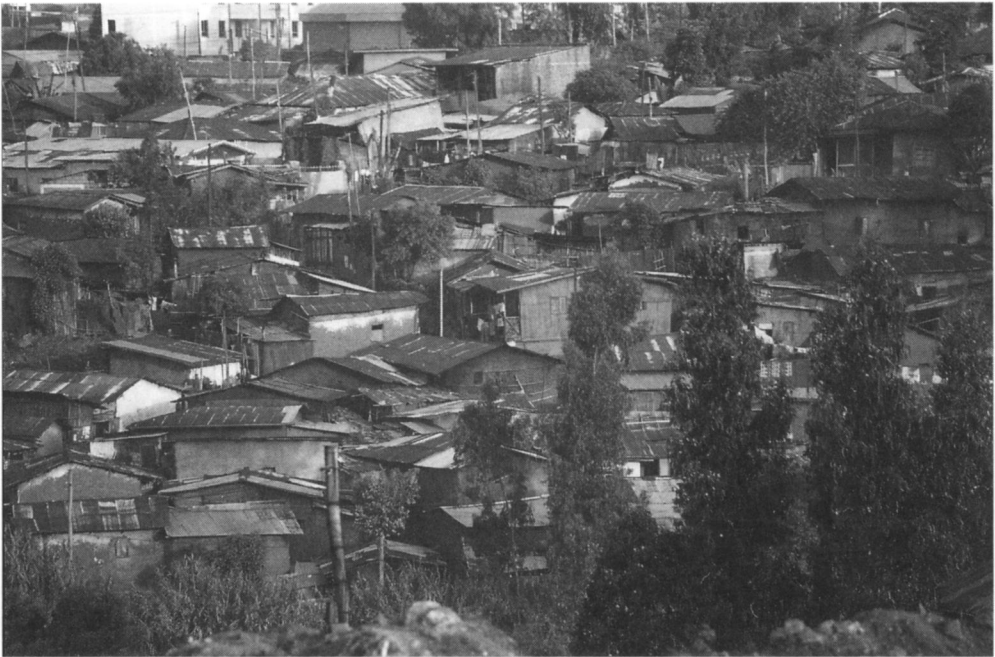


Figure 12. A neighborhood in the Arat Kilo area (2004) by Michael Tsegaye.

thus fractured and shown to be a ruin. However (and perhaps more importantly), what this dialectical image also reveals to us is that “the objects of modernity, while positing themselves as the new, inevitably bear their own demise, yet deny their aging process” (Jaguibre 331).

The dialectical image, Walter Benjamin tells us, is “identical to the historical object; it justifies blasting the latter out of the continuum of history’s course” (qtd. in Buck-Morss 219). But as such, dialectical images are not empirically given, nor are they in any way arbitrary. Rather, the present mode of an object is a force field whereby its fore-history and after-history play themselves out. The fore-history of an object is its possibility, the after-history is the condition of its cultural transmission. If we read the two together we get the object in its present mode. Reading the two together also means that the after-history and the fore-history confront each other so that the object’s present mode is no longer part of natural history but is an object with political prescience: “translat[ing] into ruin the fragility of former utopian projects” (Jaguibre 346). Instructively, it also releases hope from the air that we breathe.

NOTES

1. See R. Pankhurst.
2. In all of my descriptions of monuments in Addis Ababa, I have either quoted or at least maintained the language of the official descriptions. I have done this in order to convey some of the intentions of the officials who erected the monuments. Sylvia Pankhurst was a good friend of Haile Selassie.

Moreover, the *Ethiopian Observer*, which she edited until her son took it over in 1962, was uncritical of Haile Selassie's regime. Indeed, we can be sure that everything she wrote was intended to support Haile Selassie's regime, and in particular its modernization program.

3. The purpose of the palace is explained in Gebissa. A copy of the paper can be found at the City Hall of Addis Ababa Public Library.
4. See Haile Selassie's speech to Government Officials on their roles and responsibilities in April 1961. In this speech, Haile Selassie is keen to remind his officials that Parliament was granted to them by their benevolent Emperor. The speech was republished as "The Emperor on Ministerial Responsibility."
5. Since the fall of the Derg regime Ethiopia has been governed by a form of ethnic federalism whereby all nations and nationalities that make up the current polity are constitutionally guaranteed the right of self-determination up to secession. As a result, it is now common to hear in Addis Ababa that the promulgation of the rights of self-determination has actually generated more ethnic conflict, not less.
6. See Ahderom. A copy of the paper can be found at the City Hall of Addis Ababa Public Library.
7. Only twenty percent of their plan had been implemented by the time the Italian occupation ended, and most of it was bombed by the Italians in an act of revenge, just before the occupation ended. See Gebissa; Zewde.
8. Despite a long history of interaction, the Oromo people are said to have been incorporated into the Ethiopian polity through wars waged by Minilik II in the mid- to late-nineteenth century—when the southern limits of Christian Abyssinia were extended to their present boundaries. For more on the history of Oromo incorporation within the Ethiopian state see, "Old Abyssinia."
9. The event was reported in "The Year That Was."
10. For more on the railway see, R. Pankhurst.
11. The story of political shootings in Meskel Square is taken from Tiruneh 211.
12. These facts were obtained from discussions with artists who worked on the project of redesigning Meskel Square.
13. The article describes the fading Russian on the billboards near Bole Airport, replaced by signs in the modern European languages and then claims: "The changing signboards are a metaphor for a country of 60 million that is emerging from Marxist dictatorship, famine and war and hesitantly reaching for democracy and its place in a globalized world" (England A12).
14. The *Ethiopian Observer* lists his name as Dejazmatch Zawdie Gabrre Selassie [sic].

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